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Hollywood's Controversial Heroes

orig. under Gelmis

Revolutionaries Are Film Fare

The days are long past when Hollywood sought out safely innocuous subjects to film. The movie industry now is planning films that may alienate some potential ticket-buyers—biographies of a number of controversial figures and frank treatment of racial themes. This is the first part of a series examining these projects.

By Joseph Gelmis

Hollywood is getting ready to tell it like it is about revolutions—black ("The Confessions of Nat Turner"), red ("Viva, Che!") and blue ("Lenny Bruce"), and about revolutionaries—violent (Malcolm X) and non-violent (the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.). The era of the protest film and the militant human rights leader as a Hollywood hero is at hand.

Less than a week after the murder of the Rev. Dr. King, seven filmmakers had registered with the Motion Picture Association of America the titles of biographies they proposed to make about the life of the martyred apostle of nonviolent social revolution. Already in some stage of preparation were a half dozen major American films that will be made during the next year or so about Malcolm X, Nat Turner, Jack Johnson, Che Guevara, John Brown and Lenny Bruce. If Hollywood goes ahead with production plans, the studios will have invested up to \$15,000,000 in the belief that there is a market for controversy.

The interest in racial themes is so pervasive that the first film to be made by the prestigious Theater Guild, as it enters motion picture production, will be "The Slaves," a "frank, nonsentimental view of slavery in the South circa 1850." The film, to be shot in color on a \$750,000 budget this summer on location in northern Florida, stars Stephen Boyd as a plantation owner, Dionne Warwick as his Negro mistress, and Ossie Davis as a slave who organizes a break for freedom.

The script for "The Slaves" was co-authored by John O. Killens, Alida Sherman and Herbert J. Biberman, who will also direct. Killens is a Negro novelist, author of "Youngblood" and "The Cotillion" as well as the screenplay for "Odds Against Tomorrow." Miss Sherman is director of psychological services at a New York hospital. Biberman says "The Slaves" will expose the wounds that the system inflicted on black and white that are still not healed.

Another plantation drama that will tell it differently from the way "Gone With the Wind" did is "The Slave Stealer," based on a novel by Boyd Upchurch. The film, about the underground railroad for escaped slaves in the 1850s, has a screenplay by William Norton, who wrote the script for the interracial comedy-adventure "The Scalphunters." Harold Hecht will produce "The Slave Stealer" for Columbia Pictures.

Warner Bros.-Seven Arts will film "The Learning Tree," based on Life staff photographer Gordon Parks' autobiographical novel about his boyhood. Marking the

first assault on the still lily-white field of directing, Warner Bros.-Seven Arts' astute young studio boss, Ken Hyman, has hired Parks, 55, as Hollywood's first Negro director. Parks will direct "The Learning Tree" and three other films.

Parks was born in Kansas and spent his late adolescence penniless in Michigan. He worked as a piano player in a brothel, as a dishwasher, a floor-scrubber in a flophouse and a porter on a train before buying a cheap camera and, through grit and luck, becoming one of America's best-known fashion and news-feature photographers. Not only is his own new career as film director a unique achievement for a Negro, but Parks' film will be one of the few upbeat, happy-ending stories that will be made in the upcoming spate of dissent movies.

Unlike Parks' story, the typical hero of the new cinema of controversy is a man who was ostracized or killed. Malcolm X and the Rev. Dr. King were both assassinated at the age of 39. Rebel leaders Che Guevara, also 39, Nat Turner, 30, and John Brown, 59, were executed. Lenny Bruce, harassed by law suits and the police, died at 40 of mysterious causes, though the death was officially attributed to an overdose of narcotics. Jack Johnson, the first Negro heavyweight boxing champion, died in an auto accident in 1946 at the age of 68. He had been resented for being "uppity," and he died embittered.

Current controversial film biographies include:

- "The Confessions of Nat Turner." Producer

David Wolper paid \$600,000 for the screen rights to William Styron's novel, which later won this year's Pulitzer Prize for fiction. The novel tells the story of Turner's leadership of the 1831 slave uprising in Southampton County, Va., in which 55 whites were killed. Filming is to start next spring, with 20th Century-Fox financing the production and Norman Jewison, who made "In the Heat of the Night," directing. The script is being written by Negro playwright ("Take a Giant Step") Louis Peterson. Styron says, "I'll be his consultant, but he'll bring a central Negro viewpoint to the project." The film will probably not use an established star like Sidney Poitier. Asked whom he would like to see get the part, Styron said: "I'm very impressed by Al Freeman Jr." Freeman played the murdered Negro subway rider in the film version of LeRoi Jones' "Dutchman." Wolper says of Nat Turner, "I see him as a hero, as somebody who resisted oppression."

"A 'Nat Turner' competitor with a lower budget, 'Ol' Prophet Nat,' based on a book by Daniel Panger, is reportedly being pushed into production by an independent outfit, Nero Films.

- "The Great White Hope." Producer Lawrence Turman describes Howard Sackler's play with that title as "a play about a Negro prizefighter, Jack Johnson, the first Negro heavyweight prizefighting champ. The play opens after he has become champion. American racists, an early 20th Century white backlash, are calling for